

Why (and how) should humanitarian actors consider looking at existing Social Protection systems from the ‘first-wave’ of an emergency response? A take on the Ukraine crisis.

This brief is a rapid analysis of the opportunities in Ukraine for humanitarian actors to work with existing social protection systems from the onset of the emergency. Doing so is often not prioritised during the early phases of emergencies when there is pressure to deliver. This is because social protection systems are considered to be ‘developmental’ and frequently regarded as part of a longer-term approach to be linked with at later stages during emergency programmes handover or when developing exit strategies. But understanding more about, as well as coordinating and working directly with, existing systems can be a valuable starting point to co-create and deliver an effective, localised and accountable humanitarian response, whilst still being swift, impartial and lifesaving.

1. Context

One third of the total US\$ 1.1 billion (US\$ 288.6 million) appealed for through the [UN Humanitarian Response Plan \(HRP\)](#) for the Ukraine crisis on the 1st of March is proposed to be delivered as multi-purpose cash assistance (MPCA) to 1.3 million conflict-affected people of the currently reported 7.1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs)¹ inside the Ukraine over the next 3 months². As of [5th of April](#), international humanitarian organisations have delivered US\$15.4 million in the form of MPCA to 68,000 people in 24 oblasts across the country. This is one of the few times humanitarian cash assistance takes front-and-centre stage as a high-level strategic priority in the first-wave of an emergency response of this scale and complexity. Despite these advances³, and with the notable exception of some agencies⁴, coordination and collaboration between the wider humanitarian cash community and social protection or development actors from the on-set of the crisis requires strengthening. While focus rests on the dire situation of people-on-the-move, attention should be equally given to the national and local institutions, ministries⁵, private sector⁶ and development actors that were already prepared for crisis⁷ and continue to provide assistance, work to minimise service interruptions and aim to ensure the Ukrainian population have the financial means, purchasing power and ability to meet their basic needs. They are also receiving sizeable domestic, foreign (ODA), private and individual crowdsourced⁸ financing, including remittances from abroad, to help meet needs and recover the economy that may trump international humanitarian aid⁹.

¹ IOM Internal Displacement Report (April 2022): <https://www.iom.int/news/71-million-people-displaced-war-ukraine-iom-survey>.

² HRP MPC Cash Chapter, costs are based on the Minimum Expenditure Basked (MEB) designed the Ukraine Cash Working Group (CWG).

³ Recognising that while this still only targets about 20% of the total IDP population in the country, cash assistance may not be feasible or the most appropriate modality in all parts of the country, particularly those under currently ongoing conflict.

⁴ Such as the Red Cross, Caritas, UNICEF and, FAO, UNHCR, [IOM](#), WFP and development actors such as UNDP and ILO.

⁵ “Despite the full-scale aggression by Russia, the entire life-supporting infrastructure of the state is working sustainably”, the Prime Minister stressed. The Ministry of Social Policy (MOSP) works every day (March 9, 2022): <https://www.msp.gov.ua/news/21522.html>.

⁶ National Bank of Ukraine (NBU), ‘Banks are working 7 days a week’: <https://bank.gov.ua/en/news/all/chi-ye-vihidni-dni-u-bankivskovi-sistemi-ukrayini>. ‘NBU recommended retail businesses allow people to make cash withdrawals at retail chains and shops to meet cash demands’: <https://bank.gov.ua/en/news/all/za-berezen-na-kasah-magaziniv-ukrayintsi-otrimali-z-platijnih-kartok-blizko-38-mlrd-grn>.

⁷ MOSP: <https://www.msp.gov.ua/news/21435.html>. February 23, 2022. The Minister said the social protection system is prepared for any development. “We have prepared step-by-step action plans for social protection in case of increasing risks and today we are ready”.

⁸ In March 15th, NBU confirmed that of the 12 billion UAH (US\$408 million) crowd-sourced online, it has provided 260.75 million UAH (US\$10 million) to the MOSP to deliver emergency assistance and social protection to crisis-affected people <https://bank.gov.ua/en/news/all/na-pidtrimku-armiyi-ta-gumanitarnu-dopomogu-zibrano-blizko-12-mlrd-grn>.

⁹ In addition to amounts crowd-sourced online, Ukraine has received over US\$ 7 billion from institutions and governments including World Bank, IMF, EBRD, EU, USA among many others. How much of this (and additional funds that continue to be pledged and received) will be spent on social protection and humanitarian assistance to meet needs remains to be seen.

2. Existing and Adapted Social Protection

As reported elsewhere¹⁰, the Ministry of Social Protection ([MOSP](#)) continues to provide regular social protection services and benefits and to rapidly adapt existing shock responsive social protection schemes from its response to COVID-19¹¹ to meet the growing humanitarian needs of vulnerable crisis affected people. Since the conflict started, it has announced new measures, that included¹²:

- adjusting the [ePidtrymka](#) programme to support people who lost their jobs¹³,
- adapting the [Help Nearby](#) programme (set up during COVID-19) to target vulnerable IDPs,
- developing an [e-Assistance Aid Platform](#)¹⁴ (alongside Ministry of Digital Transformation MDT and UNDP) to allow [on-demand application for social protection emergency assistance](#),
- incorporating digital features to allow people who lost their documents to access benefits¹⁵,
- [simplifying registration for IDPs in the centralised database](#)¹⁶,
- approving rent subsidies and shelter assistance for IDPs,
- increasing regular and military pension amounts, and
- making special care provisions to families, children, elderly and disabled affected by conflict.

From 2021, the MOSP delivers assistance through post offices and local banks using a centralised and devolved *Unified Social Information System (EISS)*¹⁷, that contains a social registry with critical information on vulnerabilities. The MOSP is also creating an IDP database to target the most vulnerable with support from the [Ukrainian Red Cross, People in Need and IMPACT](#) and aiming to increase coverage and registration with the support of [Caritas](#) and [UNHCR](#). Although the MOSP predominantly makes payments through [post offices and authorised banks](#) (such as JSC Ukrposhta and JSC Oschadbank), it also seems to be seeking to expand to other delivery mechanisms. The government communicates these new measures and decisions through a combination of virtual and physical leaflets, online websites, news channels (e.g. Dtaa TV app that can be downloaded), 1545 free of charge hotlines open 24/7 to address the concerns of the Ukrainian population¹⁸.

While the war is inevitably affecting key infrastructure and services, government and private institutions continue to deliver essential services and assistance to Ukrainian citizens choosing to stay and unable to leave the country¹⁹. Understanding to what extent vulnerable people in need can access and utilise those services and benefits²⁰, and where or why they cannot, will be essential for humanitarian actors to better position themselves and add value through their interventions by

¹⁰ World Bank (2022), Living Paper: <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/451971649433673308/pdf/Living-Paper-3.pdf>.

¹¹ As part of its response to COVID-19 the Ukrainian government provided additional payments. Though system challenges identified in the past included lack of coverage universality, adequacy and comprehensiveness, some were tackled during the COVID-19 response.

¹² Including assistance for people with disabilities, unemployment schemes, assistance to war veterans (and to those currently fighting), maternity benefits, child grants, child protection and education support delivered as cash transfers. Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Paul Harvey and Rachel Slater <https://www.ids.ac.uk/opinions/how-can-humanitarian-responses-support-social-protection-in-ukraine/>.

¹³ The Ukraine Prime Minister approved the provision of 6,500 UAH (US\$ 216) to people who lost income due to the crisis mainly in conflict-affected geographical areas: <https://news.dtki.ua/society/community/75215>.

¹⁴ MOSP announcement of the e-Assistance platform: <https://www.msp.gov.ua/news/21657.html>.

¹⁵ Registering, applying or receiving social protection cash transfer assistance requires a passport and an individual tax number certificate (RNOKPP). State actors and banks have found ways to register online, digitise IDs and allow beneficiaries to confirm identity, through QR codes among other forms to address the issue of possible loss of identification or documentation as a result of conflict and displacement.

¹⁶ In recent weeks, the MOSP announced that any IDP can apply for a certificate to the authorised community focal point (CNAP) or directly through the Action Portal online. Previously this could only be done through the social protection bodies of the RSA and cities of regional importance <https://www.msp.gov.ua/news/21555.html>.

¹⁷ The MOSP and Ministry of Digital Transformation (MDT) developed the EISS to make payments more streamlined and cost-efficient, especially in occupied areas, by providing verification mechanisms and tackling double payments.

¹⁸ Particularly within the country and through the following networks: Ukrtelecom, Kyivstar, Vodafone Ukraine, Lifecell etc.

¹⁹ 'While they will inevitably be eroded by the conflict, Ukraine's (...) social protection system, should be protected as much as possible' an ODI article stated. <https://odi.org/en/insights/two-ways-the-humanitarian-system-should-harness-global-solidarity-with-ukraine/>

²⁰ On April 4th, more than 100,000 victims of hostilities received assistance from the funds received through the NBU account of the MOSP: <https://www.msp.gov.ua/news/21649.html> and 3 million people received pension benefits in the month of March.

complementing assistance, extending technical expertise and financial or resource capacities, providing operational support or covering gaps of existing systems and ongoing programmes.

3. Linking Humanitarian Cash and Social Protection

There are many options to add value and complement social protection systems and programmes. Those can entail²¹ for example: using or delivering humanitarian assistance through existing programmes (e.g. 'topping-up' vertical expansion and/ or 'topping-out' horizontal expansion), leveraging or piggybacking on elements of ongoing programmes (e.g. delivery mechanisms, information, communications or feedback systems), aligning to certain aspects of those programmes (e.g. targeting methodologies, transfer value amounts), tweaking elements of ongoing programmes (e.g. increasing transfer value amounts, adjusting targeting), protecting and strengthening existing systems (e.g. extending resources to increase assessment, registration or payment mechanisms capacities) or linking with and creating referral pathways to social protection services and benefits. Beyond these, there is also a need to focus on supporting human resources and strengthening the role of key frontline workers, including social workers and staff at [Centres for Social Services](#).

The Ukraine Cash Working Group (CWG) has been coordinating humanitarian cash actors in-country since 2014 and meeting regularly since the first day of the current crisis under a highly fluid environment. During the first days and weeks of the response, it placed more emphasis on quickly harmonising different elements around the design of MPCA by creating four task teams (around targeting, delivery mechanisms and transfer values, registration and monitoring) and requesting government permission to collect primary data (on cash feasibility, market, price, delivery mechanisms and household vulnerability). However, it placed less focus on engaging with social protection actors and relevant authorities, such as the MOSP, Ministry of Digital Transformation (MDT) and Ministry of Reintegration and other development actors and donors, from the onset of the emergency to jointly design and deliver MPCA, to align it with regular or adapted social protection programmes and to enquire about what information social protection actors may already have, or also be collecting. This could have been done more systematically, including through the 4 task teams, especially since the CWG previously engaged and used MOSP data before the current crisis²² (e.g. to revise the MPCA minimum expenditure basket and transfer value).

Nevertheless, it is encouraging to see that, less than a month into the response, the CWG increased its pro-active engagement with the MOSP, MDT and Ministry of Reintegration and individual agencies ([UNICEF](#)²³, [FAO](#)²⁴, [UNHCR](#)²⁵, [OCHA](#)²⁶ and [WFP](#)²⁷) are collaborating with the MOSP to support

²¹ Shock Responsive Social Protection Toolkit (2018) O'Brien, Holmes, Scott, Barca <https://www.social-protection.org/gimi/gess/RessourcePDF.action;jsessionid=ev76kAyN837kyfoTWchaEVN6TMZgM1AnoCY9WYgkcJeTdAhxmSx5!203667844?id=55748>.

²² CWG MEB was designed prior to the war and based on analysis of MoSP data on subsistence level available for 2020-2021 <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/ukraine/document/ukraine-mpc-transfer-value-revision-february-2022>.

²³ UNICEF and the Ministry of Social Policy launch a multi-purpose cash programme to support the immediate needs of 52,000 households, as conflict rages across the country. The additional financial support complements existing state programmes that existed before the war and those that have been set up since hostilities started, such as for internally displaced people. It will provide UAH 2,220 (US\$74) per person and target households with three or more children, including at least one child under 2-years and families with two or more children, including one living with a disability. <https://www.msp.gov.ua/news/21634.html>

²⁴ FAO will provide agricultural assistance combined with cash transfers for vulnerable smallholder farmer households (240,000 people) in key affected regions and oblasts for 3 months (March-May 2022). In addition, households would be provided with short-cycle vegetable and potato seeds, animal fodder to increase production and prevent livelihood loss (World Bank).

²⁵ UNHCR is working on referrals on needs from authorities at the Oblast level to speed up enrolment with the department of social policy (and) is trying to obtain a data sharing agreement at the national level with the Ministry of Social Policy (CWG minutes).

²⁶ OCHA could support with advocacy and facilitate access to Government's databases (CWG minutes).

²⁷ WFP is coordinating MPC with UNHCR and IOM and encountering similar bottlenecks aiming to go to significant scale. The limitation is to get beneficiary data quickly, either through registration or Government lists (CWG minutes).

and strengthen systems early on. Over the past weeks, the CWG [discussed ways to engage the MOSP](#) (either to create a separate strategic liaison task team or invite the MOSP to CWG meetings to update them on ongoing CWG activities) and agreed on the former²⁸. While both options have merit, the former may risk hindering the ability to strengthen the much-needed synergies between humanitarian cash assistance and existing social protection programmes. The latter approach could also benefit ‘hearing from’ and ‘being updated by’ the MOSP than solely the other way around.

More importantly, the CWG can still gauge MOSP’s capacity and interest to lead or co-lead the CWG and assess what national coordination structures exist that CWG actors, co-leads or an interlocutor can attend. If there is bandwidth and willingness, social protection actors would contribute valuable inputs to the work of the 4 CWG task forces, particularly around targeting, registration, delivery mechanisms and transfer values²⁹ by sharing experiences, challenges and gaps of different programmes. The MOSP’s involvement, participation or leadership in the CWG could be key to understanding the extent in which existing systems are delivering benefits and reaching the most vulnerable people, and where they are not. They may also be able to share critical information about how challenges are being addressed and where (or through what kind of) support is required.

Several experiences exist from CWGs in other contexts (such as in [Lebanon](#), [MENA region](#), [Iraq](#), [Greece](#), [Colombia](#), [Philippines](#), among others) that successfully engaged the government, donors and social protection actors to participate, design cash responses together or led these groups to attempt to ensure those links and that can be leveraged. Other [global learnings, ways, insights](#) and [barriers](#) to [linking humanitarian cash with social protection](#) resources have also been documented.

4. Recommendations

While humanitarian actors take a no-regrets approach to coordinate and get cash out of the door at speed in the next three months, acknowledging existing systems and understanding operational and technical details of their programmes as early in the response as possible is equally important. Doing this does not, and should not, necessarily come at the cost of responding urgently and saving lives, especially as organisations also take some time to develop and scale-up their own programmes.

Although using, leveraging or enhancing elements of existing social protection systems and programmes are not free of challenges, risks, political considerations (to ensure assistance remains impartial and neutral, especially in areas where the government cannot access) or delays (e.g. to ensure data protection or sign data sharing agreements and MOUs), understanding what assistance and services exist can allow agencies to target better, reach people faster and communicate or refer those most in need to what assistance they are entitled to, as well as how or where to get it.

Below are some practical actions and proposed recommendations to consider ensuring those links.

- For the Ukraine Cash Working Group (and/ or Inter-Sector Working Group):
 - Immediate Actions:
 1. Identify key government social protection actors, interlocutors and national or local organisations working on strengthening systems in the country.
 2. Engage with those actors bilaterally to explain CWG objectives and activities and seek their views on MPCA and how it can complement existing systems.

²⁸ CWG minutes 05th April.

²⁹ Although it is notable that the CWG has harmonised transfer values among all actors, this is arguably one of the first times the government provides higher amounts to the affected population in need e.g. US\$216 (MOSP) vs US\$74 (CWG).

3. Invite the MOSP (other social protection actors) to present ongoing regular and shock responsive social protection programmes as possible (providing as much operational and technical detail of each as possible e.g. targeting methodologies, coverage, registration, information systems, delivery mechanism, transfer values, communications, feedback mechanisms etc), including beneficiaries' ability and challenges to access benefits (particularly in ongoing conflict zones and non-government-controlled areas).
 4. Request for government focal points from different programmes and, if possible, technical experts in the different aspects (targeting, delivery mechanism, transfer value, registration etc) of those programmes, with the view to involve or invite them to respective CWG task teams (to share approaches and ensure coherence in the delivery of MPCA).
- Once the relationship is established:
 1. Assess what government coordination structures exist and whether CWG co-leads or selected members can participate representing the CWG.
 2. Gauge government/ MOSP interest and willingness to participate, co-lead, present, share updates on social protection programmes in CWG meetings and be involved in the task forces or included in the mailing list.
 3. Identify government/ MOSP needs for immediate technical, resources or operational support for different programmes and assess/ mitigate any risks in doing so on the impartiality of delivering humanitarian assistance.
 4. Jointly develop and co-create living technical tools, operational guidance or procedures on delivering humanitarian MPCA in ways that complement, protect, support existing systems and ongoing programmes.
 5. Nominate CWG focal point(s) to look more detailed at the entry points for MPCA links with specific social protection programmes and systems and to facilitate different agencies' support to different programmes.
 6. Focal point(s) can map out existing social protection programmes, benefits and services in real time, develop an action plan to align/ link MPCA with social protection programmes and to support MOSP draft a transition plan from humanitarian cash MPCA to MOSP-led social assistance payments.
 - Systems Building and Strengthening:
 1. Review with government, other social protection actors and donors the coverage, adequacy, comprehensiveness and quality of social protection programmes and identify ways, actors and funding that can support.
 2. Engage in joint assessments, registration, response design, existing programme adjustments (including targeting and transfer values), co-creation of new programmes and/ or contingency planning with MOSP.
 3. Facilitate and support the necessary MOUs and/ or data sharing agreements required between the MOSP, other social protection and development actors and humanitarian cash or inter-sector working group actors.
 4. Host workshops to allow for deeper dives into programmes or topics and support idea exchange on ways to protect and enhance systems.
 5. Identify longer-term capacity needs and necessary exchanges between humanitarian, development and social protection actors where needed.
 - For UN agencies and INGOs delivering MPCA:

1. Consider leveraging collaborative platforms (UNCCS, CCD) to support, complement or enhance social protection systems and programmes together, if possible, for e.g.:
 - enhancing technical support and capacities on regular activities around assessment, targeting, registering, monitoring or communicating.
 - operationally reviewing access constraints, delivery mechanisms concern, and transfer values gaps or tweaking programme adjustments required.
 - providing additional resources to complement assistance or co-create new programmes for the most vulnerable (including ‘topping-up’, ‘topping-out’).
 - assessing ability to deliver MPCA through ongoing programmes and systems.
- For Donors:
 - Prioritise financing of humanitarian MPCAs and cash assistance programmes that align or link with the government and MOSP to complement existing systems.
 - Resource coordination mechanisms and capacities to facilitate humanitarian actors’ coordination and collaboration with social protection actors and attend meetings.
 - Coordinate internally between humanitarian and development branches of donor agencies to ensure the sustainable financing of (and smooth transition) from humanitarian-led cash assistance to government-led social protection.
 - Coordinate externally with other humanitarian and development donors, with multilateral financial institutions (World Bank and IMF) and with other government ministries responsible for financing social protection and humanitarian assistance (e.g. Ministry of Finance and others) to ensure financial coherence in the response.

5. Conclusion

As the Ukrainian government continues to look at stepping-up efforts to reach those most in need through different shock-responsive social protection programmes, it should be a humanitarian imperative to find better ways to acknowledge, coordinate with and, where needed, support these systems from the onset of an emergency (and preferably before). While social protection programmes and local responses should not be seen as a ‘panacea’ or a silver bullet to meet every need in a humanitarian response, looking at those systems from the first-wave of an emergency response may enable a ‘just as fast’, if not faster response, as organisations naturally also take some time to develop and scale-up their own programmes. So, what if humanitarian actors and their coordination structures used an unapologetic approach towards looking at existing systems from the beginning of an emergency response? They may find that existing systems and programmes do not need to be strengthened or adapted but simply protected and supported. Or they might find that using those systems to deliver cash assistance takes longer than the urgency to save lives, but that perhaps aligning to certain elements is more practical and feasible. Either way, both humanitarians and social protection actors have much to gain from exchanging information, capacities and resources and from working with each other since day one of an emergency. This can be key to collaborating and co-creating a localised response with national actors and stakeholders that avoids humanitarian assistance exclusions, inefficiencies, overlaps or missed opportunities for system strengthening. And it can use the momentum and attention to shed light on the need to sustain, support and finance those systems in the longer-term beyond the first phases of the crisis.

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